

FORM B – BUILDING

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Assessor's Number USGS Quad Area(s) Form Number

18-111 Orleans K EAS.200
NRDIS 2001

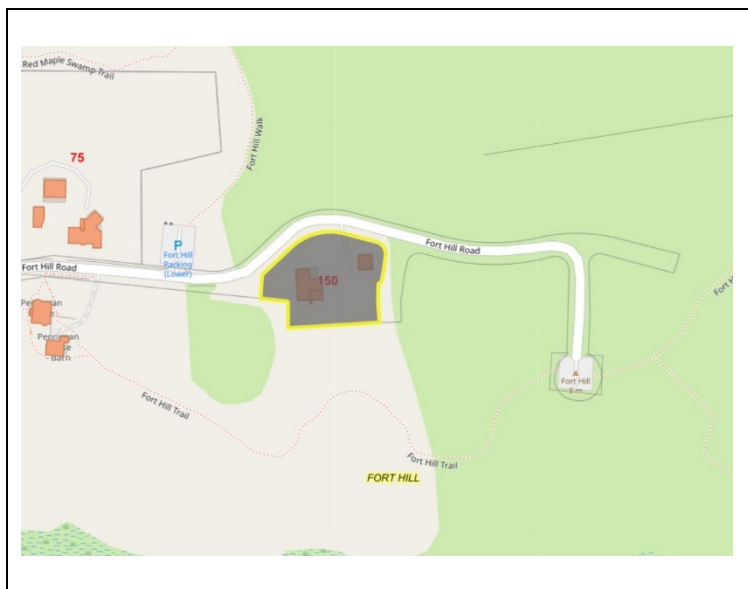
Town/City: EASTHAM

Place: (*neighborhood or village*): Fort Hill

Photograph



Locus Map



Recorded by: Eric Dray, Preservation Consultant, for

Organization: Eastham Historical Commission

Date (*month / year*): April 2025

Address: 150 Fort Hill Road

Historic Name: Seth Knowles House

Uses: Present: Single Family Dwelling House

Original: Single Family Dwelling House

Date of Construction: ca. 1790 (poss. ca. 1742)

Source: Fort Hill Rural Historic District Nomination

Style/Form: Greek Revival

Architect/Builder: Unknown

Exterior Material:

Foundation: Brick, concrete block

Wall/Trim: Wood clapboard, wood shingles/ Wood

Roof: Asphalt shingles

Outbuildings/Secondary Structures:

Two-car garage, built ca. 1952-1971 based on USGS aerial survey (Photo 3)

Major Alterations (*with dates*):

One-story ells (mid-20th c), some replacement windows

Condition: Good

Moved: no ☒ yes ☐ **Date:**

Acreage: acres

Setting: This house is set in a hollow in the midst of what was agricultural land and is now open space under the control of the National Seashore. The parcel remains largely open with a few mature trees, and the house is surrounded by foundation plantings. An asphalt driveway and parking area connects to a detached garage east of the house.

INVENTORY FORM B CONTINUATION SHEET

EASTHAM

150 FORT HILL ROAD

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☐ Recommended for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

If checked, you must attach a completed National Register Criteria Statement form.

Use as much space as necessary to complete the following entries, allowing text to flow onto additional continuation sheets.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

Describe architectural features. Evaluate the characteristics of this building in terms of other buildings within the community.

This house may have begun as a Cape built by Willard Knowles sometime after 1742, which may itself have incorporated an earlier structure, possibly the Treat House; or it may have been built in the late-18th or early-19th century as a Federal-style house that was later expanded to its current form and style. According to accounts in the Fort Hill Rural Historic District National Register Nomination, the first-floor layout of the main block is a variation on the typical Cape Cod house plan, with a central chimney and entry hall, north and south parlors, and a large room in the rear. That said, without material and construction methods analysis, it is not possible to determine if the bones of earlier houses are encased within the current house. In its current iteration, it is an example of a two-story, side-gable, Greek Revival-style house.

The main block and rear ell of the house (which may have begun as a kitchen wing), rest on brick foundations. The front elevation is clad in painted wood clapboards and the remaining elevations are clad in wood shingles. The roof is clad in asphalt shingles (wood shingles originally) and two large, corbeled brick chimneys rise from the main block. The roof form includes prominent gabled wall dormers or cross bays on the front and rear elevations. The roof cornice has projecting molded box cornice with partial returns across the gable ends characteristic of the Greek Revival style. The frieze boards below the cornice on the main block are ornamented with a layering of dentil molding and modillion blocks. These features are an unusually elaborate ornamental detail. The other primary feature characteristic of the Greek Revival style is the front entrance surround with the door flanked by elongated pilasters (flat columns) that extend up to a molded lintel.

Fenestration includes wood, 6/6 double-hung sash set in slightly projecting frames with molded lintels. It is unknown how old these windows are, but the 6/6 muntin pattern was the common muntin pattern for Greek Revival-style houses. The front door appears to be a molded wood panel door with transom lights (again age unknown). The rear ell has a second entrance accessed from an open deck. The entrance surround has plain pilasters and lintel above. The roof cornice of the rear ell does not have the same ornamentation as the main block. Gabled dormers on the rear ell are likely later additions. There are one-story ells extending from both sides of the main block. The north ell has a hip roof and rests on a concrete block foundation. The south ell has a shed roof (foundation material unknown).

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Discuss the history of the building. Explain its associations with local (or state) history. Include uses of the building, and the role(s) the owners/occupants played within the community.

(Historical Narrative is derived in part from the Fort Hill Rural Historic District National Register Nomination and the Form B for 75 Fort Hill Road.) Ownership of both this property and 75 Fort Hill Road trace back to Willard Knowles. According to the 2001 National Register Nomination Form for the Fort Hill Rural Historic District, the first white settler here was Samuel Treat (1648-1717), who served as Eastham's minister in the late-17th century. It appears that the Treat property on Fort Hill was purchased by Willard Knowles in 1742.¹ Revolutionary War veteran Col. Willard Knowles (1711-1786) married Bethiah Atwood (1715-1789) sometime before 1735 when they had their first child. Willard Knowles' will and inventory of his estate after his death in 1786 establish that Willard Knowles owned most or all of what is now known as Fort Hill. According to the Fort Hill Rural Historic District nomination, coastal maps dated 1780 show only one house on Fort Hill, which may be the original Treat house, then occupied by Willard Knowles. Knowles was among the most affluent residents of Eastham. Following his death in 1786, his land on Fort Hill was divided between his youngest sons William and Seth. The northern side, including what is now 75 Fort Hill Road, was granted to William Knowles (1755-1830). Seth Knowles (1753-1821) was granted the southern farm consisting of the homestead buildings of Willard Knowles that included a dwelling house, barn, corn house, and other outbuildings. It is likely that Seth Knowles built this larger two-story house – what is unknown is whether the house incorporated his father's mid-18th century Cape house.

¹ The source for this date is unclear.

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This southern farm (150 Fort Hill Road) passed to Seth Knowles' son, James H. Knowles (1781-1872), and then his grandson and namesake, Seth Knowles (1821-1905). Throughout the 19th century, 150 Fort Hill Road remained the more prosperous of the two farms, with a ranking of the third most valuable property in town. Salt-making was one of the land uses practiced by the Knowles family during the first half of the 19th century at Fort Hill. Of 43 saltworks in Eastham in 1824, the southern Knowles farm had the eighth largest valuation. Both Knowles families raised grain and potatoes and had orchards. A sizable orchard was located south of this house in the mid-1800s. Each farm also showed a corn house among its outbuildings, indicating the continued importance of corn. Peat swamps encompassed three-quarters to one acre on each of the two Knowles farms. Peat was assessed on the southern farm until 1877. Two or three cows and the same number of young stock were kept on each farm around the middle of the 19th century. These numbers of cattle would produce more milk than the ordinary family could consume, and butter and cheese were being produced. In 1873, the number of cows on both farms more than doubled, reflecting the completion of the railroad extension through Eastham and the expansion of the market for fresh milk. It is believed that Seth Knowles was one of the first in town to take advantage of the railroad when in 1872 they began sending their milk cans twice a day to Provincetown, when the railroad was extended to the final terminus.

Rather than focusing on specialty crops, the Knowles family concentrated on poultry raising. Hen houses were on the southern Knowles farm around 1880, and on the northern farm in the early 1890s. The southern farm had more substantial and permanent poultry buildings. Beginning in the early-20th century, when the southern farm had passed to Seth Knowles' daughter, Abbie May Knowles, hen houses were the only remaining outbuildings except the barn.

Seth Knowles and his wife, Abigail, had four children, none of whom married. Seth willed this farm to two of them, Seth Edgar and Abbie May, both then in their 40s. Since Seth Edgar had suffered brain damage while at sea, the farm was operated by Abbie May. In 1906, the dwelling increased in value from \$1,200 to \$3,000, possibly indicating a reassessment or a major addition (possibly the expanded roof form with cross gables). While cows and fowl were still kept, they were kept in much smaller numbers. When Abbie died in 1927, the farm passed out of the immediate family and was administered by her executor until its sale to Charles A. Gunn in 1936.²

Nova Scotia-born Charles Angus Gunn (1895-1968) continued to operate the property as a farm. He came to Cape Cod after buying an ice business in Wellfleet and later became caretaker for the Albert Greene Duncan family, which owned a large farm north of Fort Hill on Doane Road. Upon Duncan's death, Gunn acquired the farm. Meanwhile, he acquired the right to take hay off the nearby Knowles farms. This haying may have been responsible for keeping a large area of Fort Hill open, including the land between Fort Hill and Skiff Hill that has since grown into a largely cedar scrub. Gunn negotiated to purchase the southern Knowles farm, succeeding only when a Knowles trustee pressured the heirs into selling. In 1936, he began to revive the agricultural use of the farm, registered under the name Nauset Moors Farm. They kept 20-25 milk cows, a greater number of cattle than had previously been kept on the southern Knowles farm. Gunn used this farm primarily for growing high-quality clover and alfalfa; he pastured the cattle on the northern farm by arrangement with the Kattwinkels (then owners of 75 Fort Hill Road). Gunn marketed his milk locally, through door-to-door sales, stores, and a school contract. A USGS aerial survey photo taken in 1938 shows both the house, along with a large farm building and other smaller outbuildings (no longer extant, Photo 4).

With increasing land development pressure, Charles Gunn's son stated that he would subdivide the property into lots and build cottages. The elder Gunn sought to preserve the farm and therefore sold the property in 1950 to outsiders - James H. Leach, a veterinarian, and his wife Frances.³ The Leaches continued some farming and kept the land open, hiring a herdsman and converting the stable for occupancy by horses that were rented for recreational purposes. In 1960, the Leaches sold property that included this house, 23 acres of upland and 14 acres of flats and meadow to the Fitchburg-based Mel-Con Realty Trust. That same year, Mel-Con recorded a subdivision entitled Fort Hill Estates with 33 lots linked by a system of private roads with communal boat landings, and with this house on Lot 22 (Figure 2).⁴

Mel-Con sold 10 of the 33 Fort Hill Estates lots. The initial planning to establish Cape Cod National Seashore apparently did not include either of the two former Knowles farms in the Fort Hill area. While the boundaries of the future park were still under discussion, a helicopter tour of the area was arranged in May 1961 for House and Senate subcommittee members. During this visit, the helicopter landed on Fort Hill and members saw the beginnings of the Mel-Con subdivision, with stakes marking the future

² Barnstable County Registry of Deeds, Book 523/ Page 82.

³ Book 770/ Page 591.

⁴ Plan Book 157/ Page 131.

location of houses. The southern farm at Fort Hill was thereafter included within the proposed boundary. National Park Service acquisition of the eight lots and the balance of the tract which had been subdivided but not yet sold was accomplished despite some opposition.

In 1961, Mel-Con sold this house to Robert M. and Sarah P. Burrill of Eastham.⁵ Sarah (Sally) Pickells Burrill (1930-2012) was born to Reverend John Pickells and Edna Bell Ferguson Pickells in Burns, OR. She attended Bennington College in Vermont as a vocal major. She married Robert M. Burrill (d. 1985) of Livermore Falls, ME in 1949. They moved to Fort Hill in Eastham in 1961. Sally was very active in community theatre and played starring roles in many productions including Fiddler on the Roof, Mame, and Hello Dolly. She sang with the Provincetown Choral Society, and she served as costume designer and seamstress for many productions. This property has remained in the extended Burrill family through a series of trusts.

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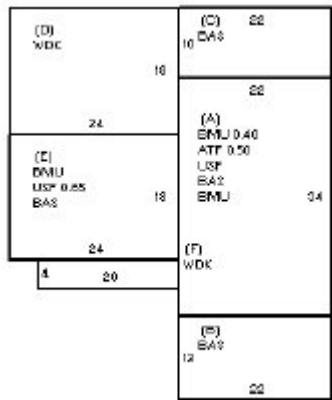


Figure 1. Assessor Sketch.



Photo 2. View from Fort Hill Road, looking SSW.

⁵ Book 1130/ Page 300.

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Photo 3. View of garage and house, looking west.



Photo 4. Detail of 1938 USGS aerial survey.

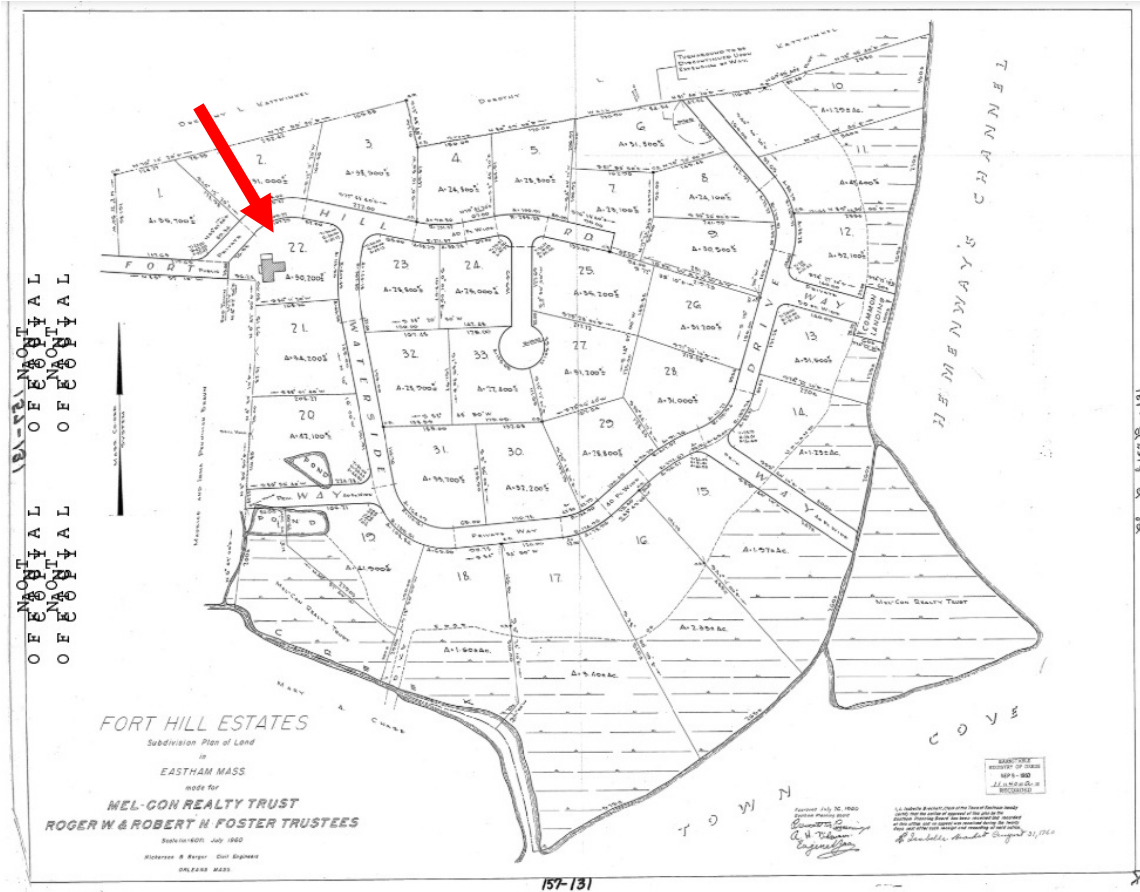


Figure 2. 1960 Fort Hill Estates subdivision plan (arrow to Lot 22 added).